

Najm Al-Din Kubra's 'Theory of Lato'if' In the Doctrine of Islamic Aesthetics

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Abstract: The conceptual foundations of Shaykh Najm al-Din Kubra's "theory of latā'if" are examined scientifically, and the mechanism of educating disciples through the "colors" of the human heart in fostering the perfect human being is described.

Keywords: Heart, disciple, perfect human being, upbringing, spirit, consciousness, pir (spiritual guide), teacher, concept, black color, value, form, content, essence, white color, gray, national identity, spirituality, art, originality, tradition, integration, mechanism, history, shaykh.

Introduction: Najm al-Din Kubra (pen name; his full name was Ahmad ibn Umar ibn Muhammad Khivaqi al-Khwarizmi) (1145, Khiva – 1221) was a great shaykh, one of the most prominent representatives of Sufism, and the founder of the Kubrawiyya order (his pen name means "the great star of the religion"). Legends spread about Kubra's ability to perform miracles, foresee events, and influence people with his penetrating gaze. From an early age, Kubra was interested in learning and showed exceptional talent. He quickly mastered the fundamentals of Islam, Sharia, Hadith, and Qur'anic exegesis (tafsir). At the age of 16–17, in order to deepen his studies, he left Khwarazm and traveled through Iran, Egypt, the Levant (Sham), and Iraq. Striving to gain deeper knowledge of the Sufi path (tariqa), he attended the gatherings of several shaykhs and dervishes.

For the first time, in Egypt, he became a disciple (murid) of Shaykh Ruzbihan Vazzan al-Misri (d. 1189 CE), learned the etiquette of the path from him, and married the shaykh's daughter. Later, in Hamadan, he studied under Shaykh Ammar Yasir (d. 1187 CE), and in Dezful under Shaykh Ismail Qasri (d. 1193 CE), among other teachers. He devoted more than 25 years of his life to learning and scholarship. In 1185, Kubra returned to Khwarazm. There he built a large khanaqah (Sufi lodge) and established his own religious school. Kubra called people to goodness, knowledge, generosity, and

courage. Hundreds of people benefited from spiritual enlightenment through his guidance. His disciples—Majd al-Din Baghdadi, Humawi, and Sa'd al-Din Daya—are shaykhs who gained fame in the history of Sufism.

Kubra set forth his views in several treatises written in Arabic. Among the main ones are: *Fawā'ih al-Jamāl wa-Fawātih al-Jalāl* ("The Fragrances of Beauty and the Openings of Majesty"), *al-Uṣūl al-'Ashara* ("The Ten Principles"), *Risālat al-Ṭuruq* ("Treatise on the Paths"), *Risālat al-Khā'if al-Hā'im min Lawm al-Lā'im* ("Treatise on One Who Fears the Blame of the Blamer"), and others. He also has a Persian treatise titled "On the Etiquette of Wayfarers."

Najm al-Din Kubra was a great scholar with profound knowledge in many fields of learning. Najm al-Din Kubra was also a deep expert in the human heart and spirituality.

Kubrawiyya is a Sufi order. It was founded in Khwarazm at the beginning of the 13th century by Najm al-Din Kubra. His works explain the essence of the order and its distinctive requirements and rules. According to Kubra's Sufi teaching, a human being, by their essence, is a small universe; since all things and qualities of the greater universe (the cosmos) are present within the human being in their own ranks and stations, seekers of the path of Truth must pass through certain ascetic and spiritual disciplines (riyāzat) in order to attain such

perfection. On this path, a perfected spiritual guide (pīr-i kāmīl) must provide guidance. Kubra expressed the foundations of attaining perfection in the following ten requirements (“Ten Principles”) (Table 1). In his

view, in order to know the Truth, the disciple, under the guidance of the pīr, had to ascend the steps of the tariqa ladder consisting of ten stages.

(Table 1)

The ten foundations of attaining perfection

No	Name	Meaning
1.	Tawbah (Repentance)	The beginning of all deeds: repenting before Allah and making a firm resolve to devote one’s future life to divine goodness and righteous acts.
2.	Zuhd (Asceticism)	Piety and self-restraint: avoiding what is unlawful (haram), turning toward what is lawful (halal), and refraining from actions forbidden by Allah.
3.	Tawakkul (Trust in God)	Relying on Allah’s mercy and power in carrying out all actions and affairs.
4.	Qanā’at (Contentment)	Being satisfied with little in life, moderation, and liberation from base desires.
5.	‘Uzlat (Seclusion)	Remaining in solitude; purifying the spirit through retreat (khalwa).
6.	Tawajjuh (Turning toward God)	Turning wholly toward Allah, seeking His help, and striving for Him with the heart.
7.	Sabr (Patience)	Testing one’s faith and intention; only those who endure the suffering and trials of the path of Truth attain the goal.
8.	Murāqabah (Deep Contemplation)	Immersion in reflection, sensing the purification of the heart and freedom from base passions, attaining inner calm, and perceiving the mercy and compassion of the Almighty.
9.	Dhikr (Remembrance)	Constantly remembering Allah, continuously repeating His names, sacred formulas, and supplications.
10.	Riḍā (Content Acceptance)	Fully entrusting oneself to Allah’s will with a deep awareness of His power and finding joy in it; this stage signifies the seeker’s closeness to the Truth and the Truth’s closeness to the seeker.

Najm al-Dīn Kubra gives a special place to the “Latā’if” theory in such works as al-Uṣūl al-‘Ashara, Risālat al-Ṭuruq, Fī Ādāb al-Sālikīn, and Fawā’id al-Jamāl. Through specific spiritual exercises, the Sufi must sense and “see” this center, which is manifested through changes of state, form, and color.

Because Najm al-Dīn Kubra had a profound understanding of subtle inner experiences, he

developed the “Latā’if” theory accordingly. According to this theory, the human spirit consists of invisible subtle centers (latā’if). This is something situated between consciousness and feeling, and between spirit and body (see Figure 2).

It is so delicate that even perceiving it is difficult. Yet these “latā’if” centers are of great significance in human life. The Sufi needs to activate, sharpen, and

learn to perceive precisely these centers. These “latā’if” are the human being’s divine qualities. During Sufi disciplines and exercises (riyāḍāt), these latā’if are

imagined as transformations of various inner states—appearing as shifts in colors and changes in forms.

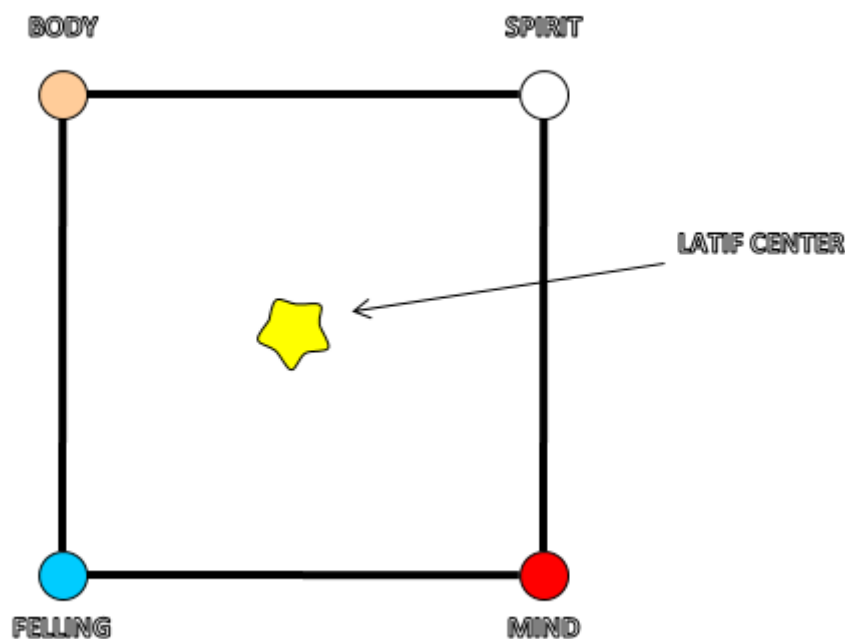


Figure 2. Najm al-Din Kubra’s “Latā’if” theory. There is a latif (subtle) center at the center of the body, spirit, feeling, and mind.

In Najm al-Din Kubra’s view, the point, the spot, and the circle play an important role in the transformation of a disciple’s spiritual states (see Figure 3). The circle is in

constant rotation and includes the spot within itself. However, all of these tend toward the center—that is, toward the point. By comprehending the essence of the point, one can perceive the realm of Allah.

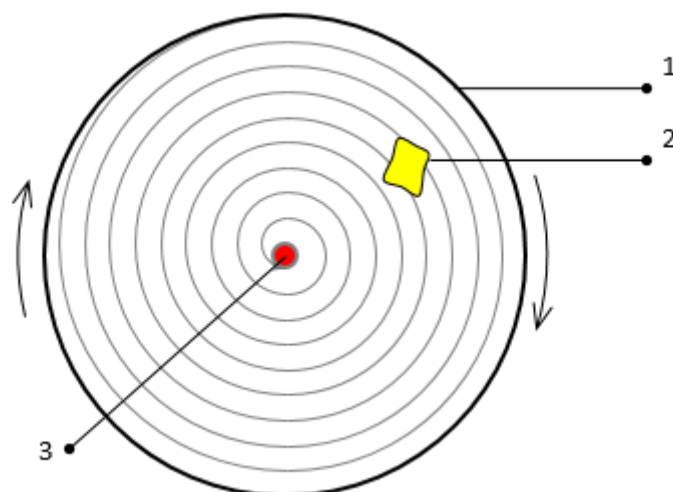


Figure 3. 1. Circle — the rotation of the celestial spheres. 2. Spot — a symbol of the world. 3. Point — time.

Thus, colors indicate the Sufi’s spiritual states and the successive stages of the journey toward Allah. The diversity of colors and their continual change express the seeker’s condition and the ongoing nature of

conscious inner experiences, showing that he is still in talavvun—that is, amid the turbulence and multiplicity of inward, reflective переживания and thoughts. The soul’s transition from one color to another is a sign of

spiritual development. Ultimately, this process leads to a state of colorlessness, that is, to tamkīn (steadfastness). Having entered the state of tamkīn, the Sufi is freed from talavvun (variegation) and becomes united with the realm of Unity (waḥdat). In this context, the blue color is considered appropriate.

With the appearance of the red color, the seeker repents and the path of the ṭarīqa begins; love is awakened in the seeker's heart, and he lives in the remembrance of Allah—this corresponds to the yellow color. The red color signifies that the seeker's spirit begins to separate from the body, that he draws closer to ma'rifa (gnosis), and that he has come to understand the world of spiritual essences. However, this stage still reflects a condition in which one has not yet been fully freed from the point of greed and desire. Then the

white color appears, which indicates the purification of the heart and the beginning of realizing Truth. Becoming aware of the realm of Truth, the seeker experiences the state of tawḥīd (affirmation of divine oneness).

After that comes the green color. Green is a sign of sainthood (walāya). It denotes familiarity with the "secret of secrets," with the unseen (ghayb), and it may also indicate that the seeker is attaining his true essence. While these colors signify the seeker's spiritual journeys with Allah, the black color indicates the return journey from Allah to the people—the mystery of creation—expressing the acquisition of the treasure of hidden secrets (kanz al-asrār), that is, attaining all truths, and being immersed in awe and wonder.

Table 2

The stages of the disciple's journey toward Allah as reflected through colors and their meanings

No	Colors	Stages	Meaning of stage
1.	Blue 	Sharia	Sharia is the straight, divine path and the system of divine law. It is the religious-legal system (code) of Islam. In Sharia there are six main categories: 1) Farḍ — obligatory acts that must be performed; 2) Mubāḥ (recommended/permissible) — actions regarded as acceptable and encouraged but not compulsory; voluntary customs, some of which also fall under sunnah; 3) Mubāḥ (in the narrow sense) — permitted everyday acts not considered sinful and connected with ordinary life (eating, sleeping, marriage, rest, etc.); not prohibited and not obligatory; essentially equal to the category jā'iz (jā'iz is a synonym of mubāḥ); 4) Ḥalāl — lawful, permitted, pure: allowed actions, foods, water, animals, etc.; 5) Ḥarām — strictly forbidden actions, foods, things, and states (the opposite of halal); 6) Makrūh — disapproved, unpleasant

			norms: matters between haram and halal. A person who steps onto the Sufi path must first thoroughly learn and master all the requirements of Sharia.
2.	Yellow 	Tariqa	Ṭarīqa is the second stage in Sufism after Sharia. It is a divine practice that safeguards Sharia and also includes it. While at the level of Sharia worship may still be driven by longing for Paradise, at the level of Ṭarīqa seekers are those who have “given their lives” for the vision of the Truth. Ṭarīqa is like a flower that has grown from the soil of Sharia. Different orders choose different ways to reach God and Truth; each follows the path that suits the heart’s inclination, yet they do not step outside the bounds of Islam, and each considers its way correct. By simple analogy: to reach a distant city one may travel by plane, train, car, motorcycle, bicycle, horse, donkey, or on foot—by different roads. Allah knows best. A Sufi who enters the ṭarīqa renounces worldly concerns, fully entrusts his will to the master (pīr/shaykh), and strictly follows four core principles: Tawakkul — entrusting all matters to Allah; Shawq — loving and yearning only for the Creator; Zuhd — renouncing love of the world and living in constant worship, needing none but God.

3.	Red 	Gnosis	Gnosis is the third stage after ṭarīqa. At this stage the Sufi (murid) must recognize Allah's existence as absolute truth, view the entire universe as Allah's creation, regard union of the human spirit with Allah as the highest aim, and understand the relativity of good and evil not by intellect but by the heart. For this purpose they engage in dhikr and praise, striving to behold the Divine Beauty.
4.	White 	Truth	Truth is the fourth stage of Sufism. After "attaining Truth," the Sufi, as a separate personal self, must pass to the Lord; when <i>fanā'</i> (self-annihilation) is reached, this stage is also completed. A believer

			who enters the Sufi path strives to pass through love (muhibb), discipleship (murid), dervishhood, scholarly/gnostic mastery ('ālim/'ārif), then sainthood (walāya), and finally the rank of prophethood. In Sufism, the outer aspect of religion is Sharia, while the inner aspect is ḥaqīqa. One who reaches ḥaqīqa deeply senses and knows that the Lord is the eternal Being, and everything besides Him is temporary; he understands this inwardly. The people of ḥaqīqa are those who have risen from human qualities to divine qualities: in them Sharia is “the word,” ṭarīqa is “the way,” ma'rifa is “love for the Lord,” and ḥaqīqa is “the state.”
5.	Green 	Wali	<i>Walī</i> means “friend,” “owner,” “protector,” “one who is near.” It signifies one who is close and dear to the Lord—a perfected person, a patron and protector of servants. They are pious, learned Sufis, known for <i>karāmāt</i> (saintly marvels) and the ability to foretell events
6.	Black 	Kanz al-Asrār (Treasure of Secrets)	This signifies the return journey from Allah to the people (the mystery of creation), expressing the acquisition of the treasure of hidden secrets and immersion in awe and wonder. Re-perceiving the inner wisdom (kernel) of Sharia, the seeker becomes “wrapped” in a dark, spot-like color.
7.	Gray 	Kull	The seeker appears in the presence of Allah. Having been freed from black, he enters a state of colorlessness. The seeker who attains the rank of

			"servant" ('abd) reaches the goal in a state of single-color unity (steadfast oneness).
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№	Color name	Stages of Sufism
1.	Blue	Sharia
2.	Yellow	Tariqa (The Path)
3.	Red	Gnosis
4.	White	Truth
5.	Green	Wali (Sainthood)
6.	Black	Kanz al-Asrār — attainment of the Treasure of Secrets
7.	Gray	Rank of the Servant ('Abd)

Figure 4. Stages of the Sufi's spiritual state based on colors.

Thus, by re-perceiving the inner essence and wisdom of Sharia, the seeker becomes enveloped in a dark, spot-like color. Finally, the seeker's spirit once again appears in the presence of Allah. Having been freed from the black color, he enters a state of colorlessness. The seeker who attains the rank of servanthood ('ubūdiyya) reaches the goal in a state of single-color unity.

The stages of the disciple's journey toward Allah are reflected through colors, and at each of these stages criteria are given for the duties the disciple must perform.

It is evident that in Najm al-Din Kubra's teaching, the

meanings of colors differ from the interpretations of colors later described by Sufi theorists. He explains the qualities of seven colors in correspondence with seven concepts (see Figures 4 and 5a, b).

The seeker must inform his spiritual guide (pīr) of the states of his soul and of which color appears before his inner vision. Based on this, the pīr recognizes the disciple's condition and assigns appropriate tasks to him. In the teaching of the Khwarazmian shaykh, the colors are arranged in the following order (see Figure 6).

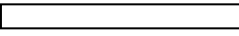
№	Color names	Colors	Сўфийликнинг даража босқичлари
1.	White		Islam
2.	Yellow		Iman
3.	Blue		Ihsan (Excellence)
4.	Green		(Trust)
5.	Sky blue		Yaqin (Complete Certainty)
6.	Red		Irfan (Gnosis)
7.	Black		Ecstasy

Figure 5a. The seven concepts of the seven colors in Najm al-Din Kubra's philosophical worldview.

Perfect human being

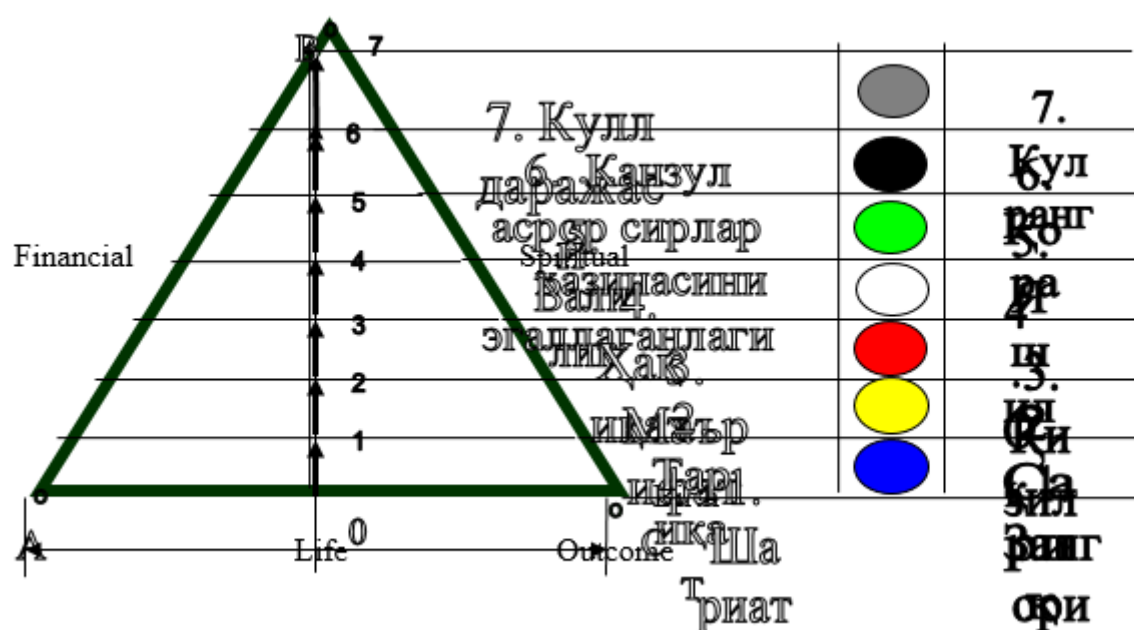


Figure 5b. Stages of the disciple's (student's) spiritual states on the basis of colors in attaining perfection.

Najm al-Din Kubra attached great importance to the seeker's faith and belief. Therefore, he repeatedly emphasizes the words *īmān* (faith), *iṭmi'nān* (inner calm/assurance), and *yaqīn* (certainty/conviction). However, there is a similarity in the interpretation of the black color. As in Najm al-Din Kubra's teaching, later Sufis also regarded the black color as a sign of awe and wonder, presenting it as a symbol of the soul's state of explanation/interpretation in *fanā'* (annihilation of the self).

The color of the heart differed among scholars, saints, and others. According to Farid al-Din 'Attar, the perfect human being is one who has attained eternity in the realm of significance and has been characterized by divine qualities; who has been honored by transcending the boundaries of sensation and reason, yet has not diminished the worshipful service of servanthood. It is described that the human spirit that has realized the Truth, dissolved into it, melted away, and merged with the One Spirit is itself Truth.

It is said that the color of Mansur al-Hallaj's heart was gray; that is, he belonged to those saints who ascended to the highest level of discipleship—the seventh stage, the rank of the servant.

Khwaja Ahrar Wali was a blessed saint from Turkestan and a famous shaykh-murshid of the Naqshbandi path. He held great authority and standing in the Islamic world and was recognized as a "wali-saint." The color of his heart was green.

The heart-color of Ahmad Yassawi was also green. At the age of 63, he went underground in Yassi, and a qualitatively new phase of life began for him. Life there proceeds according to different laws. To be freed from worldly worries and live only in the divine, spiritual realm is not granted to everyone. Yassawi, relying on a hadith, calls such an exalted state "dying before death." A person in this state crosses the limits of material life and draws nearer to the Muhammadan Light (*nūr Muḥammadī*). Such a saint no longer engages in the loud *dhikr* practiced by Sufi dervishes, but performs worship inwardly, within the heart. The wali understands that only the veil of the soul stands between him and the vision of Allah's Beauty.

Ahmad Yassawi says that there are five domes in the human chest:

1. Qalb / Ko'ngil (Heart) — two finger-widths below the left breast;
2. Rūḥ (Spirit) — two finger-widths below the right breast;
3. Sirr (Secret) — above the heart;
4. Khafī (Hiddenness) — the dome of secrecy;
5. Ikhfā (Most Hidden) — the dome of all goodness.

Thus, Ahmad Yassawi placed all the domes of his spiritual world within his heart.

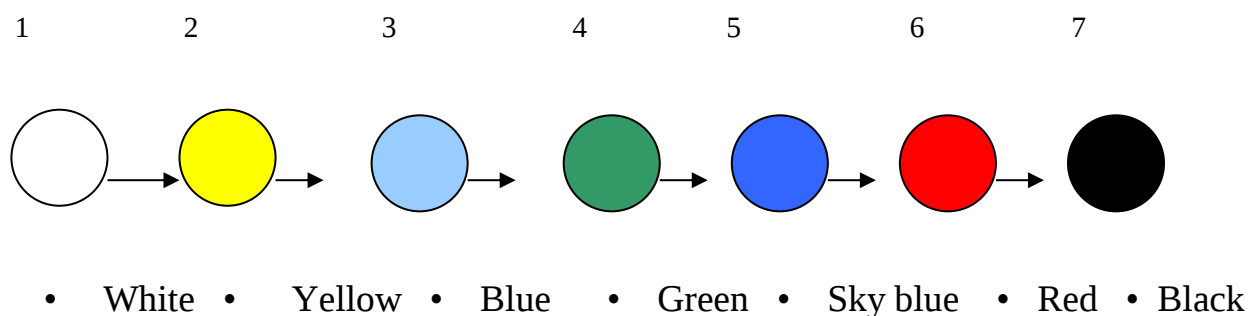


Figure 6. The order of the arrangement of colors according to the Khwarazmian shaykh.

In sum, the spiritual and psychological experiences associated with Najm al-Din Kubra's doctrine of colors and forms were further developed in later Sufi thought. (It is worth noting that these scenes and states connected with the human spirit were widely studied in Europe at the turn of the twentieth century and contributed to the emergence of new bodies of knowledge. Thus, in the philosophies of Kafka, Schopenhauer, and Freud, parapsychology occupies an important place.)

In the world, besides Allah the Exalted and His Messenger, there are also saints and the righteous, wise and venerable figures. We have long lived with faith in and respect for them. By visiting their blessed resting places, we gladden their spirits and draw spiritual and moral lessons. Honoring them means honoring purity, gnosis, and faith.

By remembering the blessed spirits of the saints and sending prayers for them, we, in turn, strive to purify our own hearts and consciences and to align our way of life with truthfulness and goodness. For the spiritual legacy and deeds of the saints serve as an example and a lesson for us. Therefore, studying the lives of perfected people is a key to knowing oneself and recognizing the Lord who created both the human being and all worlds.

The famous Argentine writer and philosopher Jorge Luis Borges once said: "The world is strange—anything can happen in it. Everything has already been discovered before us. Yet this strange world still needs even stranger investigations."

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